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ABSTRACT

The progress of a group of student teachers who used action research techniques in their student teaching experience was studied. Action research is designed to yield practical results that are immediately applicable to a specific situation or problem. Action research strategies were used by student teachers to identify and find effective ways of dealing with classroom problems, evaluation of pupil progress, and assessment of their own development as educators. At seminars held every other week for 16 weeks, the student teachers followed the action research sequence: (1) identification of specific problems they met in their classrooms; (2) definition of the problem; (3) formulation of a plan of action to implement change; (4) collection of evidence; and (5) interpretation of evidence to see if the modifications were effective. During the meetings, the student teachers shared concerns and offered suggestions to each other on handling problems. They also worked together as observation teams and evaluated each other as they dealt with common problems. The leader of the seminar aided the students in arriving at a focus for their action research and recorded their progress as they acquired action research techniques. (JD)

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ACTION RESEARCH: HELPING STUDENT TEACHERS UNDERSTAND AND SOLVE CLASSROOM PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an account of the progress of a group of student teachers using action research techniques in their student teaching experience. The action research strategies are used by the students to identify and find effective ways of dealing with classroom problems, the evaluation of pupil progress, and the assessing of their own development as educators. It is hoped that action research techniques will be one way to better prepare student teachers with the tools to gain understanding into their future classrooms and possibly solve many of the everyday problems that may arise. Action research is reviewed and student teacher use of action research techniques and the various strategies that the students chose to approach their individual and group problems are examined.

ACTION RESEARCH: HELPING STUDENT TEACHERS UNDERSTAND AND SOLVE CLASSROOM PROBLEMS

Rapidly advancing technology, changing family structure, new developments in curriculum, improved teaching methodology, and a changing student enrollment are all factors that contribute to difficulty in predicting with any certainty which skills and information will be most needed and valued by student teachers in the years ahead. One approach to this problem is to equip students with action research techniques that may enable them to approach and solve the many and varied problems that may arise in their future classrooms. The following paper reviews selected action research literature and follows a group of student teachers as they learn how to implement action research strategies.

ACTION RESEARCH BACKGROUND

For many teachers few positive alternatives exist for solving everyday classroom difficulties. Although some individuals may feel comfortable inviting a principal or colleague into their classroom to assist with a problem, others may feel threatened or intimidated by the presence of an outside observer. With few problem solving skills in their repertoire, such teachers may base their judgments and actions on emotional or subjective impressions. One alternative available to the teacher confronted with classroom problems is the implementation of the action research strategies suggested by Stephen M. Corey (1954). In this way, the individual who owns the problem becomes the researcher.

Action research is defined by Corey (1953) as "the process by which practitioners attempt to study their problems scientifically in order to guide, correct, and evaluate their decisions and actions" (p. 6). In other

words, the results of action research are directly applicable to the situation and may be evaluated immediately. The individual conducting action research does not "read about" a study; he/she is actively "engaged in" a study that will result in changed behavior or increased understanding of the situation.

Corey credits the expression "action research" and the operations it implies as coming from two sources. One is John Colliers, a Commissioner of Indian Affairs, who published his theories in 1945 and felt that laymen must participate in research because the problems are theirs and they must live with them. Collier called for observations and idea sharing by laymen participants as a part of his efforts to conduct social planning with the Indians.

The second source is a model of planned change, identified as a Normative-Re-educative strategy of changing by Bennis, Benne, and Chin (1969), and was originally suggested by Kurt Lewin for improving the problem solving capabilities of a system. According to the Normative-Re-educative view, change in a pattern of practice or action will occur only as the persons involved with the problem change their old orientations and develop commitment to new ones.

The model of changing and problem solving used by both Collier and Lewin is a cooperative action research model. It is this model that has been developed for use in educational settings by Corey and refined by others since Corey's early writings.

Teachers and students not comfortable with the term "research" should be assured that action research differs from traditional research primarily in the motivation of the researcher. The decision by a teacher to study a classroom difficulty, by action research strategies, is both a personal and a practical solution to a problem. Although a teacher may invite a

consultant or supervisor to assist in initially identifying and clarifying his/her thoughts, after training in action research he/she may feel more comfortable in implementing the strategies without outside assistance.

Although the motivations of traditional researchers and action researchers may differ, the scientific principals of objectivity remain a key part of action research studies. Corey (1954) outlines five steps that are essential to any action research study sequence as follows: 1) identification of the problems; 2) definition of the problem; 3) formulation of a plan of action to implement change; 4) collection of evidence; and, 5) interpretation of evidence to see if the modifications were effective. Generalizations can be made and used as a frame of reference for future problem solving activities. More recently, however, writers such as Oliver (1980) and Hovda and Kyle (1982) suggest that action research techniques may not always imply change; they may just result in increased understanding and insight into classroom procedures and the learning process.

Many educators, including Corey (1953), and Hovda and Kyle (1982), subscribe to the theory that a great influence on the teaching practices of professional teachers are the methods in which they are trained and the materials and procedures that they are exposed to while still in their teacher education courses.

Keeping this theory in mind, an effective stage of professional development to introduce action research would be during the student teaching experience. Exposure to action research would assist the preservice teacher in handling the discipline and behavioral problems that are common to inexperienced teachers and assist them in focusing on their teaching strategies. In this way the action research procedures could develop in a natural way and be seen by the student as a valuable teaching tool

to modify and improve his/her teaching.

The following project is the beginning of a study in which action research strategies are introduced to student teachers early in their student teaching experience. An effort is made to expose the student to action research and assist him/her in its implementation and thus encourage the student to look at problems in many different ways.

Purpose of the Student Teaching Seminars

The purpose of the student teaching seminars is to give the students an opportunity to explore how action research can be successfully implemented during their student teaching experience. The seminars are required and meet every other week for 16 weeks.

The seminar is aimed at student teachers who would, in the course of their student teaching experience, identify a discipline or motivation problem by collecting and recording information about what was happening in their classroom. Part of the process involved asking the student teachers to describe and reflect on their experiences.

Ultimately, the students were to develop a teaching strategy based on their evaluation of the information and data that was gathered. Success was attributed not only to the basic teaching strategy, but also to the action research in which student teacher judgments and decisions were based.

OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

As the seminar leader, this writer's function was to facilitate the action research by aiding the student in arriving at a focus for the research, making suggestions when necessary, and in this case recording student progress as they acquired action research techniques. The students in this report had diverse placements, personalities and lifestyles, but

they also had a common interest in obtaining their career goal at the end of the student teaching experience. In all likelihood, these dissimilar students would encounter similar problems in the classroom and would interact readily with each other. The following observations and scenarios are related to demonstrate the increased problem solving behavior on the part of the students and to outline the procedures used in the implementation of action research strategies with student teachers.

Beginning Action Research

The student teachers met for their first seminar to discuss what action research is, how action research is implemented and the potential benefits of action research in the classroom. Articles by Cory (1954) and Hovda and Kyle (1982) were discussed and handed out to the students to further reinforce the basic strategies of action research. The student teachers had been at their assigned schools for two weeks and appeared to be agreeable and interested in the idea of solving or understanding their own problems. They began to think of possible areas of interest or concern and to make plans for collecting information and identifying problems for group discussion at the next seminar.

Sharing of Concerns

Any thought that the students would view this activity as just another assignment was dispelled when we met for the second time. The students had identified several types of motivational and behavioral problems and were eager to exchange thoughts. Some of the students were interested in working with a classroom management problem that was troubling them and others made plans to focus their research on a single child with a particular academic problem or on a child exhibiting disruptive behavior due to unknown causes.

Evidence of the students' increased awareness and sharpened perceptions

can be seen in the way that this dissimilar group of students was openly interacting with each other. When one individual presented a problem statement, another was ready with a suggestion. Joan, for example, expressed concern about the inability of her third graders to understand seatwork directions without continued repetition of the directions. Immediately two or three students offered suggestions and strategies that they have used when faced with a similar situation.

Offering Suggestions

By the third seminar, discussion was lively and students were responding even more readily to each other and to the need in sharing and discussing concerns and individual progress. A typical discussion might proceed as follows: Mary voiced a concern, "Do you (class) think four hours is too long for first graders to go without an organized restroom break?"

Sue offered, "We let the children go whenever they want to go."

"Are your bathrooms located inside or outside of the classroom?" questioned Kevin.

Mary then elaborated and began thinking of possible reasons for her students' behavior. "One of my students, Tommy, is going to the bathroom every fifteen minutes. Tommy cries easily and does not appear happy with school. I wonder if he is extremely nervous or needs a medical check-up?"

Peer Support

The students began to naturally divide themselves into small groups with similar concerns and grade levels. Some of these small groups (two or three students) eventually voluntarily worked together as observation teams, observing and evaluating each other as they dealt with common problems. Examples of observation forms from Jon Nixon's (1981) book were made available. These forms were modified by the students and utilized

effectively in their action research projects.

By the middle of the semester, the students looked to each other for advice and support before turning to the seminar leader for an "absolute answer" or suggestion for their classroom problems. A good example of this behavior was found in an overheard conversation between two students who were doing their student teaching at the same school:

"Mary, how do you handle children at their desks while you are working with the reading group?"

"Are they talking too loud, Ken, or just moving around too much?"

Ken thought for a moment and then said, "I don't know where the noise is coming from. Could you observe me as I teach a reading lesson and see what you think?"

Of additional interest to this observer was the observation that the students were discussing their progress and problems among themselves at times other than during the time allocated for small group seminar. They talked about their concerns and how best to gain insight into their situation any chance they could get. This seemed to indicate that the students were motivated and interested in working together to improve the quality of their instruction and to gain new insights into classroom teaching.

Time during the remaining seminars was spent discussing topics of interest to the students and near the end of the semester each student presented a report of the progress each had made with their action research project.

Approaches to Data Collection

Students were encouraged to determine their own best method of collecting data and method of evaluating teaching strategies. Approaches varied from student to student. Students talked to parents; checked records and files;

kept logs of classroom behavior; completed minute by minute checklists on the behavior of the child or class; completed behavior checklists for each other; video taped each other as they dealt with problems; researched the characteristics of the students at the grade level that they were teaching; and, kept records of observations. The table on page 10 identifies the basic procedures used by the students to collect data and evaluate progress and presents the percentage of students using each technique. Students used these strategies in varying degrees and combinations. For example: some students filled out two or three checklists for a single student, others had 25 checklist observations for one student with specific behavior noted in each square.

Student Response to this Experience

Student evaluations and comments reveal that students do not necessarily view themselves as researchers, rather, they see themselves as teachers helping other teachers. Their comments indicate that they will use the strategies that they have learned. The following comments are from the student evaluation forms:

--"The action research experience helped me to pinpoint problems."

--"I could be specific in what I saw and then deal with specifics to change behavior.

--"This will be a useful tool in my classroom teaching."

Motivation and morale of the group were high as they knew others were working through similar problems.

--"I liked the seminar -- it provided us with a time to meet and gather information."

--"I enjoyed the brainstorming, it helps to get things out in the open."

--"I wish we could have had more time in small group seminar to discuss."

Some of the students observed the new objectivity that they had gained:

--"This experience allowed me to pull out and take a look at my feelings and then decide whether or not they were justified."

Most of the students felt that they had either solved their problems or had made a significant gain in understanding the situation:

--"I did not solve my problem, but the action research helped."

--"If I could be here longer . . . I would try . . ."

--"I feel really good about what I have accomplished."

The evaluation forms and voluntary comments on their papers reveal that the students feel they have learned a lot about identifying and solving classroom problems. A follow-up questionnaire will be prepared for mailing during the group's first year or semester of professional teaching to determine if the students are using the action research methodology that they have learned and applied during their student teaching experience.

CONCLUSION

Based on this successful implementation of action research strategies by student teachers, one cannot help but feel that the students will view the action research process as a natural part of teaching for the remainder of their professional lives. The focus of their experience was on process: the process of understanding what is occurring in the classroom and developing strategies that will work for the uncertain future.

TABLE I

Student Approaches to Collecting

Data and Evaluating Teaching Strategies

DATA COLLECTION METHOD	PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS USING THIS METHOD
A log of day by day behavior of class or individual student	71%
Compared characteristics children at the grade level observed	100%
Use of a minute by minute chart classroom behavior or individual behavior	57%
Use of a group member to monitor the behavior of the child or entire classroom	57%
Use of a group member to monitor the behavior of the student teacher in the classroom	57%
Use of a video tape for self-monitoring	42%
Use of supervising teacher to monitor the behavior the child or class being studied	28%
GROUP DISCUSSION	
Mention in final report of the helpfulness of group support	84%
Negative reaction to group discussions	14%
Mention of supervising teacher interaction with the study	28%
Contributed meaningfully to group discussion	100%

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